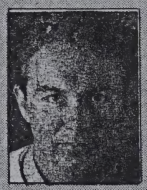
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22, 1992 G.T.

Compassion, love are mom's 'family values'

A popular catch phrase this election year is "family values." What candidate is not in favor of them? The words even have been incorporated into the name of a group pushing a ballot initiative banning laws that would protect homosexuals from discrimination.

What are family values? Obviously, proponents believe in the importance of the family unit; how parents must instill certain values in their children — such precepts as compassion and love.

PEOPLE



RAYMOND McCAFFREY

How are these values set into practice? Consider the tale of Lou Gallegos, who spent the last year and a half caring for her dying son. Last month, that ordeal came to an end when her son, 33-year-old Bruce Gwinnup, died of AIDS.

"The stigma is so bad," Gallegos said. "People treated me different. You just don't have friends.

"Families are so afraid to let anybody know. So they continue to hide this — people in their family who have AIDS — until they can no longer hide."

She herself had long thought AIDS was a matter of morality. But she learned your feelings change when someone in your family contracts the disease: "You know it's not a moral issue."

Gallegos said her son wasn't gay or an intravenous drug user, two groups at high risk of contracting AIDS. Still, she admitted that before being reunited with her son in the summer of 1989, she had not seen him for seven years. "How he got AIDS was a real mystery."

Perhaps it's enough to know that when Gallegos finally tracked her son down and saw him in Long Beach, Calif., he was dying. A Navy veteran, he had been working at a used-furniture store. His boss had been caring for him after he got sick. After Gallegos visited her son again in the summer of 1990, she decided — like any good mother would — to take him home. "He couldn't fix himself anything to eat. He was falling . . . He was laying in this mess."

Her son stayed at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Denver while Gallegos searched for a nursing home in Colorado Springs. "I was refused by several of them or given excuses. Most of them give you medical reasons: They don't have trained people, they don't have Medicaid beds. There was always something they could find."

When one accepted her son in September 1990, she considered it a miracle. "We believe God interceded for us."

Still, Gallegos faced more obstacles. Her son was prescribed a long list of medications. But Gallegos said a pharmacist serving the nursing home told her the drugs were not Medicaid-approved. So once a month, for about a year, Gallegos drove her son to the VA hospital in Denver to get his medication. She did this until last fall, past the point where he could no longer walk. "That meant lifting him in and out of the vehicle."

Gallegos did this all alone. Finally, in December, when she could no longer get her son into the car, she learned the drugs were Medicaid-approved after all. At that point, it almost didn't matter. "The AIDS had just totally taken over."

That didn't spare mother and son a final indignity. Gallegos said a pharmacist, citing Medicaid rules, refused to prescribe morphine for her son. Mercifully, nurses took up a collection for the painkiller. To the very end, she had to fight for humane treatment for her son. "As far as I can tell you, all the doors are closed in Colorado Springs."

Now, because of federal legislation, there's even less government money to buy medicine and provide health care for AIDS patients in Colorado, according to Lance Clem, director of the Governor's AIDS Council. As of April 1, those federal funds were slashed almost in half, to just over $800,000. Whereas funding was once based upon the incidence of AIDS per 100,000 people — Colorado ranks 15th in the nation — a state's allocation is now determined by its total number of cases. With about 2,200 AIDS cases since 1981, Colorado only ranks 20th nationally. "That's not fair," Clem said. "That's outrageous . . . If we don't take care of people now . . . it's going to cost us all a lot later."

Of course, some might argue that AIDS is a moral issue after all. They might point to family values like compassion and love. They might also note how the image of Lou Gallegos carrying her dying son is chillingly reminiscent of Michelangelo's Pieta, that famous sculpture of another mother holding a son who was shunned by society.

"How would you feel if everybody turned their noses up?" Gallegos asked. "They treat you like you're nothing but filth. There's no dignity. And people need that."

Raymond McCaffrey's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.